

JOB CHARACTERISTICS, PSYCHOSOCIAL (NON)WORK-, HEALTH- AND PERSON-RELATED FACTORS AS MEDIATORS OF GENDER DIFFERENCE IN SICKNESS-ABSENCE

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Statement of the problem: The majority of the absentees are women. In order to propose effective solutions to overcome this growing volume of mainly feminine sick leaves, the multiple underlying causes of this gender discrepancy first need to be identified.

Objectives: The aim of the present study was to evaluate whether several explanatory elements such as job characteristics, psychosocial (non)work-, health-, and person-related factors act as mediators for this difference when they are considered simultaneously.

Procedures: The used dataset results from the merger of two Belgian longitudinal studies, BELSTRESS III and SOMSTRESS. It includes data about 3465 individuals (1424 men) employed in 8 organizations (i.e. 3 public administrations, 3 firms from service sector, 1 manufacturing company and, 1 hospital). Participants are aged 21 to 66 years (mean age = 39). Altogether, data were collected between 1999 and 2004, with a response rate of 30.4% for BELSTRESS III, and 40% for SOMSTRESS. Anonymous self-filling questionnaires were used for data collection in both studies except for the prospective data concerning medically justified sickness absence which were registered by the personnel administration department of each organization during the calendar year following the completion of the questionnaires. Two different measures of sickness absence were considered: the absences duration (the number of days of sick leave) and the absences frequency (the number of sick leave episodes of one day or more).

Ten potential mediators were included in the analyses. These were: (1) occupational grade (ISCO code), (2) total number of working hours per week, (3) stress at work, Karasek & Theorell (1990); (4) stress outside work, Klitzman et al. (1990), (5) incapacity to withdraw from work, Siegrist et al. (2004); (6) home-work interference, Kelloway et al. (1999), (7) social support at work, Karasek & Theorell (1990) and (8) outside work, Berkman & Syme, 1979) (9) perceived health, (10) neuroticism (NEO-FFI scale), Costa and McCrae (1989, 1992)).

Simple and multiple mediation analyses were conducted using the bootstrapping method developed by Preacher and Hayes (2007). The first set of simple mediation allows evaluating if a direct effect between two variables, gender and sick leave in the present case, disappears or significantly decreases when one mediating variable is introduced in the model. The multiple mediation analysis allows to enter simultaneously all the mediators into the model and to test whether an overall indirect effect exists or not.

Results: On average, participants were absent for medical reasons 18.97 days per year. Women were significantly more absent than men with a mean of 22.31 day of sick leave compared to 14.18 days for men. The studied population presents a mean of 1.38 recorded episodes of sickness absence per year, 443 workers (17%) presenting up to 3 episodes per year. More episodes of sickness absence were recorded for women (1.50) than for men (1.20).

All the selected variables predicts the two outcome with the exception of the paid working hours per week which do not predict neither the duration, nor the frequency of sickness absence, and the incapacity to withdrawal from work which does not predict the frequency.

None of the work characteristics or psycho-social variables fully mediates the relation between gender and number of days of absence, or the one between gender and the number of episodes of sickness absence. Work strain, home-work interference, and neuroticism are the only partial mediators for both outcomes.

Both multiple mediation effects are significant. Focusing on the relation "gender/absence duration", the only three variables playing a significant mediating role are work strain, social support at work, and subjective health. Concerning the relation "gender/absence frequency", the significant mediating roles are played by occupational grade, work strain, home-work interference and subjective health.

Conclusions: Although home-work interference and neuroticism were significant simple mediators for the gender difference in number of days of sickness absence, these variables are no more significant when included in the multiple mediation model. Still, the gender difference is mainly explained by the high work strain, the low social support at work and the perceived health as poor. These results suggest the importance to consider socio-environmental elements inducing strain at work in association with the asymmetric social positioning of men and women in the labor market when analyzing gender discrepancy in sickness-absence from work.

Learning objectives

- To describe the problem of the gender discrepancy in sickness-absence from work.
- To stress the role played by socio-environmental elements in explaining the fact that most of the absentee are women.
- To identify 10 variables which partially mediate this gender difference.
- To apply a multiple mediation model in order to analyze the relative weight of each of these mediators when they are considered simultaneously
- To show that a significant part of the gender difference in sick leave can be attributed to higher job strain in women
- To discuss the importance to consider socio-environmental elements in association with the asymmetric social positioning of men and women when analyzing gender discrepancy in sickness-absence from work

Short abstract

The aim of the present study was to evaluate whether several explanatory elements such as job characteristics, psychosocial (non)work-, health- and person-related variables act as mediators for the gender difference in sickness-absence when they are considered simultaneously. A multiple mediation analysis was performed including 10 potential mediators. Results show that the gender difference is mainly explained by the high work strain, the low social support at work and the perceived health as poor. Socio-environmental elements inducing strain at work have to be studied in association with the asymmetric social positioning of men and women in the labor market when analyzing gender discrepancy in sickness-absence from work.

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